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April 10, 2017

To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis statement written by Robert Blalock entitled Blueprints.

We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Shaun Cassidy, Thesis Adviser

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Performing Arts

Jack E. DeRochi, Dean, Graduate School

Blueprints

A Thesis Statement

Presented to the Faculty

Of the

College of Visual and Performing Arts

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Of

Master of Fine Arts

In the

Department of Fine Arts

Winthrop University

May, 2017

By

Robert Allen Blalock

Abstract

This thesis statement is a written defense and an articulation of my thesis work *Blueprints*. *Blueprints* is a series of 78" X 42" indigo pencil on white paper drawings of clothed contemporary women in interaction with geometric objects. In this thesis statement, the method used to arrive at this body of work, my processes and materials, my artistic influences and artistic background will be discussed. My conclusion will connect the thread of ideas that ultimately led to *Blueprints*.

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Introduction

The drawings in my thesis exhibition *Blueprints* explore portraying the female figure in compositions with geometric objects. These objects interact with the figures and tie the compositions together. The relationship between the figure, objects, and space offers opportunities for the viewer to create narratives of their own. My foremost concerns in these works are the technical aspect of the drawing and the design of the figures. All the figures are in contrapposto stance, and they are clothed so as to allow opportunities to exploit folds, overlaps and lighting that allow a descriptive modeling of forms; the fashion style of the clothing also serves to set the figures in the contemporary world. My medium for these works is indigo blue colored pencil on 78”X 42” white paper. This medium and size were selected to create an otherworldly visual sensation and to put the figure and viewer on an equal-scale relationship.

My choice of life-size drawings aims to make them visually strong and to create an immersive, relatable experience for the viewer. In the gallery, the drawings command all attention; this focus is enhanced by the use of simple white clips to hold the paper on the wall without frames or glass, removing any detachment from the viewer and blending the paper into the gallery environment. This series is about the work, not the ornamentation.

Background

I was moved to make this thesis work through my discoveries about myself as an artist in the course of my research and experimentation in the M.F.A. program. Initially I was doing nonfigurative geometric hard edge paintings in oil on wood panels (Image 1). Hard edge painting employs highly contrasting colors with clean edges between boundaries. The results were adequate, but I only ever felt interested with the work during the drawing stage. Simultaneously, I was experimenting with simply drawing, my “other work,” as I called it. This consisted of figure drawings from random references chosen in response to their visual appeal and the belief that I could interject my artistic personality into them. It was this “other work,” that made me realize that I was better able to communicate my ideas and skills through pure, unfettered drawing. Philip Gilbert Hamerton, in *A Treatise on the Varieties of Drawing, Painting and Engraving in Comparison with Each Other and with Nature* (1889), wrote, “The naked figure, or the figure simply draped, is the only subject in which classic line-drawing fully repays the student. Here the talent of a refined draughtsman is felt and acknowledged; in the other forms of art it is generally thrown away” (73).

Another catalyst for my final thesis came from completing a previous series of pastel drawings based on a concept statement that I was required to present to a professor. As I love to draw figures, machinery and technical objects,

I decided to make my concept statement a very open-ended proposition, combining female figures with machines. Within these parameters, the series was limitless in terms of compositions and implied meanings. While being open-ended may be good for creativity purposes, in many ways it made the process more difficult, as I tried to figure how these two elements could work together. I wanted them to be involved with one another, not just drawn side by side on the same piece of paper. I settled upon the idea of drawing obese women on top of mega machines, at a similar scale. The appeal of the obesity lay in the folds and divergent anatomy which would allow me to exploit visual information like volume and form. The first drawing, and the one that set the direction of the rest of the series, has a large woman on top of a Caterpillar mega truck (Image 2). The truck was drawn first so the female figure had to be incorporated around that compositional structure. The series directive of combining elements not usually associated with one another created an original image.

Description

The works in my exhibition are indigo blue colored pencil drawings on 78" X 42" paper mounted vertically. The series subject matter is the female human figure. The challenge in figure drawing lies in the initial problem solving of identifying the most important elements in the pose as well as where to start. Solving this up front makes the rest of the drawing flow. I chose to use a single

color indigo pencil to remove superfluous ornamentation and create an image with a clear visual intention.

Once the image content is visually clear, the viewer's attention can focus only on composition and meaning. The directness of colored pencil removes any question about what the viewer is looking at by eliminating untidiness. These drawings are created predominately with line work with sparse shading. The line work delineates shape as well as volume and form through cross contour lines and overlaps. The shading is added to reinforce the line work and is applied lightly using the side of the pencil with occasional strategically deployed graphic hatching.

This approach is in many ways the outcome of my artistic background. *Blueprints* is firmly rooted in my past profession at Walt Disney Feature Animation. I was an EFX animator, working on anything in a film that was not a character such as fire, smoke, and water splashes. To be hired at Walt Disney as an artist required that I submit a portfolio of figure drawing to demonstrate the strong drawing skills needed to handle the rigorous demands involved in hand drawn 2-D animated films. The figure drawings in my portfolio had to be of a specific nature as in Disney animation the creation of volume cannot be achieved mostly through shading, but rather through line. This drawing approach requires the use of overlapping lines that spell out which volume is in front and which is in the back. These overlaps are represented in lines as T-shapes (Image 3). The T-

shape is created where one form overlaps the other and the lines form a T where the intersection occurs.

Furthermore, all the design-related decisions in a Disney animated film are based on both visual and financial considerations. The more details a character has, the more time it will take an artist to draw leading to more money spent on production costs. Therefore, every line must convey maximum visual information. Furthermore, at the Disney Studios, lines have to be of high quality. They must have more volume in the middle and taper sharply at the ends. Two drawings can have the exact same line information in respect to their placement, but the drawing with the better line quality will look better (Image 4).

I worked at the Disney Studios for nine years as a production artist, investing over eighteen thousand hours of drawing in the above-mentioned method. The resulting drawing sensibility is ever-present in my current thesis work. Rather than moving away from this drawing style, I chose to embrace it.

Materials and Size

In *Blueprints* I use a Col Erase pencil brand that is used in 2-D animation because I am very familiar with its mark making characteristics. It is also one of the few erasable colored pencils. The indigo color was chosen for the otherworldly impression it creates by depicting figures not in black, but in an airy calm of indigo. I chose Strathmore 500 series cotton drawing paper with a vellum surface

to try to match the characteristics of animation paper, as I wanted to have a similar drawing experience. Even though this paper has slightly more texture than the animation bond, I have adapted to it and exploited its effects on my mark making by using less refined, bolder marks. The scale of the drawings is 78" X 42", which sets the figures in a life-size relation to the viewer while commanding attention. The intention was that these drawings feel like real people in the room that viewers can relate to. They are mounted to the wall using simple binder clips, which reinforces the stripped-down sensibility of my thesis work and contributes to the work being the important focus. Elaborate frames and hanging methods would have emphasized a sense of separation from the viewer.

The Figure

Since my final thesis exhibition is figure-centric, I was compelled to make hard choices on what kind of figure to choose as this is my main subject. My first consideration was that the figure must be standing. My series drawings are vertical compositions that were to be filled with a full figure, which required a standing pose. The figures are in an imaginary environment with only geometric shapes. Great care was needed to find a clothed female reference that I could translate logically into a drawing, by which I mean that forms like folds, shadows and hemlines must follow an implied geometry. This quality would allow me to create a strong design. To meet all these criteria, the figure had to be one that I

felt would create the strongest drawing. Intuitively, I knew the one that would work, but there were logical underpinnings to this decision.

Before I begin drawing, I consider different aspects of form and light. The figures in this series are posed to accommodate stringed tethers and to be interactive with the geometric objects. In my first draft, I amplify the visual areas of interest, and design the components and the lighting to work most effectively. At the end of this process, if the drawing feels unified, I commit to a large format and begin designing the figure in interaction with the objects.

The figures must have strong lighting and a strong silhouette, which can add to the design's personality, as posture and proportions give the viewer an insight into the personality of the figure. Also important in the figure are overlapping forms, high contrast tonal boundaries, and the juxtaposition of straight lines against curves.

The focus is on character rather than beauty. The women are individuals with physical flaws, who do not represent stereotypes of our society's concepts of physical beauty. They have expanded waistlines, fat folds and average faces. The beauty in these works was to be the drawings, not the figures.

Artistic Decisions

In its infancy, this thesis series was to include equal numbers of nude and clothed male and female figures. When I showed the first three works in a critique, I had two drawings of clothed females and one of a nude male. My peers' reaction was that the clothed females seemed more cohesive as a series, and that the male figure seemed out of place. Furthermore, the females' interaction with the geometric objects felt more integrated, while the male seemed to be more in control of the objects. Once I decided to act on this critique, I edited the male out of the series, a strategic choice to eliminate any narrative of males having more control than females. It was also then that I decided to keep the females in contemporary clothing, which can create a more immediate connection for the viewer as being in the same era of time.

Even though the figures in *Blueprints* are taken from the contemporary woman, on the page they acquire an abstract quality that is created by the use of line, the technical drawing style, and the color indigo. This color is also reminiscent of engineering blueprint drawings and ties together thematically the mechanical nature of the geometric objects in the work.

The Box, the Sphere, the Triangle, the Line.

The box, the sphere, and the triangle are the essential shapes that can make up any form in drawing. Artists have used combinations of these shapes for millennia to construct anything, from human to architectural forms (Bridgman 54-56). These forms interact directly with the figures in my work, restraining, containing, and connecting with them. They also serve as a visual aid to support the lighting setup in the drawings and to create contrast between their linear simplicity and the more complicated organic figures. One final aspect to note is that they reference the traditional still life set up in a drawing.

The objects in my drawings have their own endowed meanings. The sphere represents purity, certainty and in the larger context, universality as planets in space are spherical. The triangle represents the Holy Trinity and the mathematical symbol Delta, which means change or difference. The boxes represent vessels or containers, holding unknown contents. One may see a box in complete visual clarity, yet not know the content within it. Lastly, the straight line is the invention of the human intellect; it does not exist in nature, but can be used to create all the shapes listed above. As visual elements, these geometric objects act to create the composition and hold it together. Their arrangement, scale and

location can offer questions for the viewer as to why they are where they are and what they might mean.

Creation Process

The creation process for my thesis work begins with a search for photo references for the figures. I exclusively rely on the internet to find these references on sites like Tumblr and Flickr. After choosing one, I make the initial drawing, which is the first real test to see whether the reference will work for my purposes. Numerous times, references I think will work end up not being adequate. After successfully finding a reference that does work as a drawing, I begin to design the composition. Usually, I do several versions of the figure in different configurations with geometric objects. For the final large drawing, I take the composition I choose into Photoshop, blow it up to the size of my paper, print it out, and transfer it (Image 5). This transfer is still an intermediary phase of the process and a very crude indication of where things are. The final large drawing always takes on a life of its own, independent from the small drawing. Things that worked visually on a small scale may not hold up under more scrutiny when enlarged. The detail of the large drawing gives it its own identity, a fresh outlook not beholden to the original.

I generally start the creation process with the figure, as I like to solve the hardest problem first; the rest of the piece falls into place more easily later.

However, in one of the works (Image 6), I designed the geometric objects and their placement first, and only then created the figure. Flipping the order allowed me to develop a figure pose that I would not have normally selected. In this case, the figure wound up with her back facing the viewer and led me to design another figure in this pose later in the series.

The Drawing Experience

As mentioned above, the large drawing replicated from the small original always takes on its own identity through the drawing experience. As I begin the large drawing after the crude transfer, I find myself drawn to certain areas first. Usually this tends to be the major outlines of the figure. Being careful not to tie them down too much too early, I build up these areas gradually with tone and bolder lines. This allows me to make intuitive decisions later based on how the drawing is developing. Once I have sufficiently built up an area, I move to other locations and bring the detail of the whole drawing up at an even progression leaving visible the under drawing and construction lines. At each level of progression, I look at the drawing as a whole, and find areas that need more work or change areas that are not working. Typically, things that are working well in the drawing will be drivers for solutions elsewhere.

In the first drawing of the series, I had a hand to draw, and the solution that worked the best was to not articulate it with line work, therefore, I simply

used sparse shading to indicate the fingers (Image 7). I subsequently used this approach on another drawing for the hands (Image 8). The more drawings I completed, the more I began to acquire a repertoire of solutions to handle different drawing problems. The things that have worked well throughout this series include pitting darks against lights, implied lines, lines that disappear and are picked back up later, as well as drawing edges where volumes meet with a hard line. The design aesthetic expressed itself as making the drawing using a variety of the above-mentioned techniques in an even application, in a harmonious way. The drawing feels complete when it gives off the feeling that it has always been on the page.

Historical Context

Among art movements and trends, my thesis work *Blueprints* shares qualities and intentions with a few. The first that comes to my mind is Pop Art. In 1953, young British artist Richard Hamilton thought popular images such as photographs of models, pictures from science fiction comics, new car designs, and scenes from movies held more meaning to people than art found in traditional art galleries. “Pop Art is popular...low cost, mass produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and big business” (Hamilton qtd. in Spillsbury 10). Pop Art was about focusing on popular culture and subjects that were familiar to everyone (Spillsbury 4-5). It represented a return to representation after fifty years

of abstraction (Marquis 63). In *Blueprints*, the references for the figures come from popular sites, like Tumblr and Pinterest that are constantly updated with a flood of new photos representing contemporary life. Like me, the main litany of well-known Pop artists began artistic careers in commercial art. James Rosenquist was a billboard painter and Andy Warhol was a magazine illustrator and graphic designer. In my thesis work, I unapologetically let my previous professional work inform the drawings.

Contemporary Drawing

In the postmodern era, the linear-progressive model of artistic practice dissolved. This was known as “endgames,” as there were no obvious paths for younger artists to follow in the years after the mid-1970s. This was partly the reason why young artists were attracted to drawing as a way out of artistic stasis. In the past, drawing was considered as the most immediate and direct artistic medium, and was usually associated with preliminary ideas and sketching (Kantor 14). During the Renaissance, drawing was defined as the parent of painting, architecture and sculpture, yet subservient to these; it was thought to be the beginning of the work and not the work itself (20). The Contemporary artist who paved the way for the legitimacy of drawing as a major mode of expression was Bernice Rose, in her 1976 exhibition *Drawing Now*. The show caused a number of high profile museums to launch their own drawing-centric shows. This new

acceptance of the validity of drawing as a serious medium was an American phenomenon (14).

Drawing represents an elemental and primal form of expression (Jones 7-10); a process as well as a medium. The appeal of contemporary drawing is that it can be as tightly manicured as a technical rendering or as loose as a sketch. In my work, I value these qualities of drawing and the versatility and directness of the medium. As described earlier, my interest was simply to make sketches of things I found visually appealing. This is my art at the most fundamental level. Realizing this led me to make the sketches my formal art and removed the stigma of the drawing being made to serve something else.

Other Artists Influences

One of the artists who inspired my work is the late Patrick Nagel. Nagel was an illustrator in the 1980's whose most recognizable image is the cover art for Duran Duran's album *Rio* (Image 9). What attracted me to his drawings is the economy of line. Every one of his lines has a dual purpose, conveying surface information as well as delineating borders where volumes meet. There is not an indication of searching in the line as in a sketch. The search has already been done and what is left is a total design. This result is a stripped down look. To the uninitiated viewer this kind of drawing may seem overly simplistic but to the initiated, the quality is clear.

The other artist that I draw inspiration from and share drawing techniques with is Alphonse Mucha, a French poster artist during the Art Nouveau period in Western Europe (Bridges). Like Nagel, he employed a sparse but very descriptive line work to convey volume and form. In many of his posters he framed his figures in abstract ornamental environments that do not interact with the figure (Image 10). The posters were simply compositions created to be beautiful, often to sell products. Like Nagel, he chose to use an economical line work to tell the visual story, a sparse line of the kind not achievable by the novice artist. My new series of work employs some of these visual attributes, and I seek to simplify my drawings in the same manner.

A note on Francis Bacon

Compositionally and technically there are stark contrasts between my work in *Blueprints* and the works of Francis Bacon. However, I feel a particular connection with the artist. In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, author Gilles Deleuze describes the artist's compositions thus:

The painting is composed like a circus ring, a kind of amphitheater as "place." It is a very simple technique that consists in isolating the Figure. There are other techniques of isolation: putting the Figure inside a cube, or rather, inside a parallelepiped of glass or ice; sticking it onto a rail or a stretch-out bar, as if on the magnetic arc of an infinite circle; or combining all these means - the round area, the cube, and the

bar. (1- 2)

This description can be applied to the ways in which I isolate the figure in my works. In the first drawing of the series, an African American female is placed on top of rectangular shape. Out of this shape, four tethers extend upwards connecting to her arms and forming a four-sided implied containing box (Image 11). This setup becomes the “place” for the work, as the other space in white becomes a flat void. The figure is contained, yet still possesses strength of posture and a sense of pride; her identity is intact despite her restrained condition. In most of Bacon's paintings, figures are set in confined spaces within cubic cages in twisted poses. The general feeling is claustrophobia while distortion of the faces and bodies suggest identity loss (Image 12). While my drawings are meant to be seen as heroic and upbeat, Bacon's are images of desperate and disturbed figures. The positive nature of my series drawings is due in large part to the cartoony way in which they are drawn and the airy nature caused by white and indigo blue pencil. The final impression is fun, bubbly and contemporary, while Bacon's paintings are dark places with antagonistic figures in more than one visual dimension set in a sickening color palette with mucous yellows and green.

Deleuze goes on to say that “The important point is that they do not consign the Figure to immobility but, on the contrary, render sensible a kind of progression, an exploration of the Figure within the place, or upon itself” (2). In

my work, while the initial idea of illustrating women held in tethers would suggest immobility and a static environment, quite the opposite occurs. The figures have a power that suggests theirs is a temporary state; they are in control of this predicament. This was not planned, as the qualities that allow them to express this power were not at first intentional. It was a combination of the choice of females, their poses, and the solid sculptural way they are drawn that inadvertently created this impression. As the work progressed, with feedback from my peers, I used this awareness to accentuate these qualities in subsequent works.

Conclusion

The visual choices I have made reflect my desire to create drawings. The thesis work features clothed females in contemporary clothing interacting with geometric objects. My focus on figure drawing from an early age, and later as an artist at Walt Disney Feature animation, have solidified the nature of my work as strongly rooted in pure drawing as the medium of choice. I chose to fully embrace the nature of my drawing style to reveal what my art is about.

My materials and medium were selected to allow me to have the most direct connection to the art as well as for the viewer to have the same experience visually. Pure white paper and indigo colored pencils were utilized to allow the artist's hand to be seen and acknowledged in the works. This approach would give

the work a signature appearance. I also left evidence of different stages of the drawing from beginning to end to maintain a sketch quality. Lastly, the indigo color was chosen for its otherworldly effect.

During my time as an M.F.A. student, as I engaged with research, I have made many discoveries about who I am as an artist and as a person. During these three years, I delved into making large-scale abstract paintings, landscapes in pastels, and portraits in oil paint. All of this work pushed me to acquire more knowledge and experience, and eventually to find what really interested me. *Blueprints* stands as a culmination of this journey.

Images

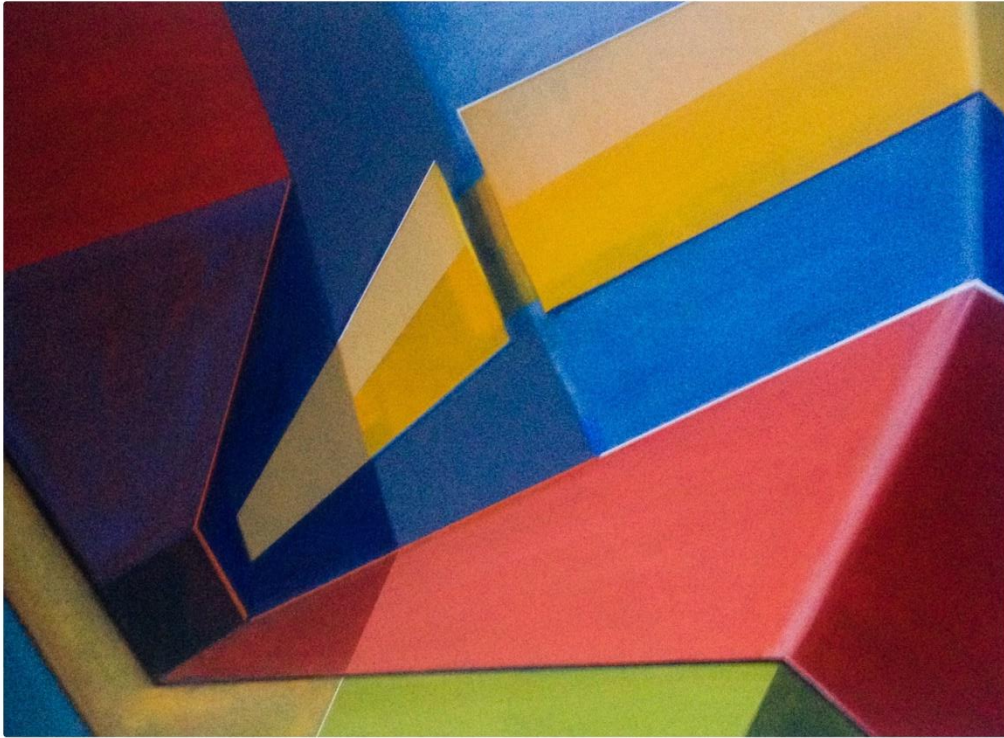


Image 1. *No Way Out*, Oil on wood, 4'X 3', 2014



Image 2. *Mega Cat*, pastel on paper, 36"X 24", 2016

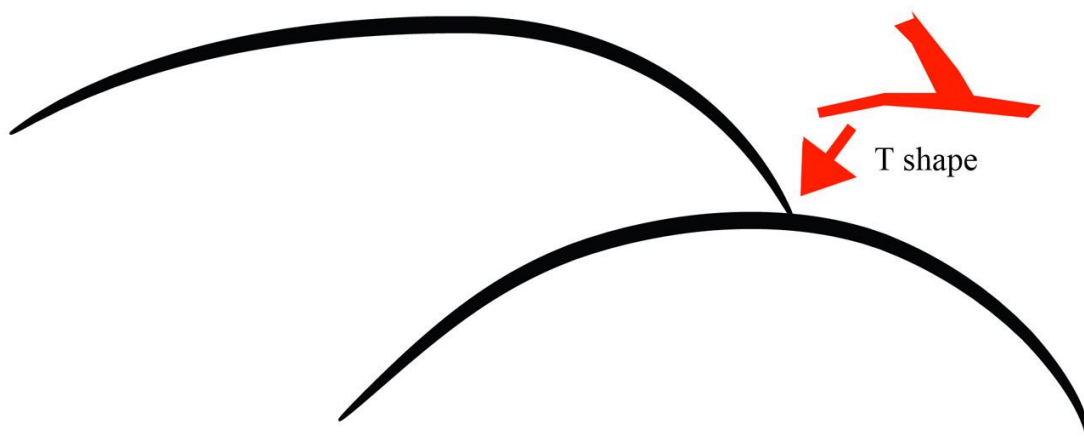


Image 3.T-Shape overlap example

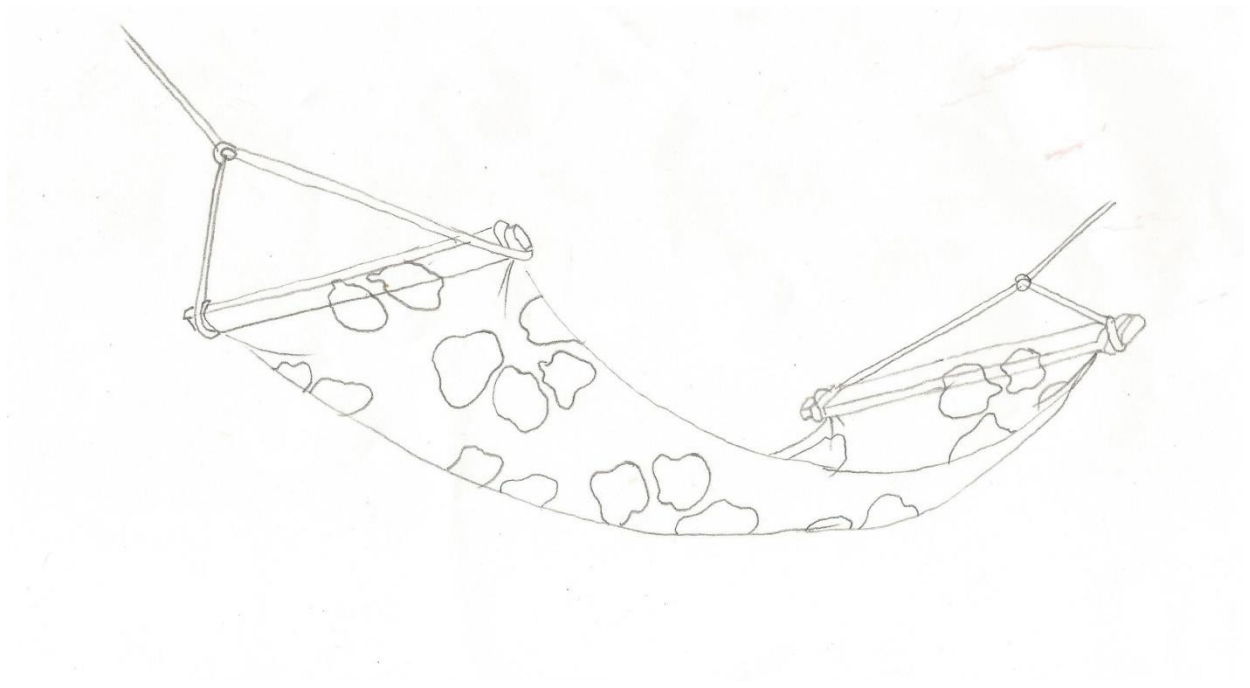
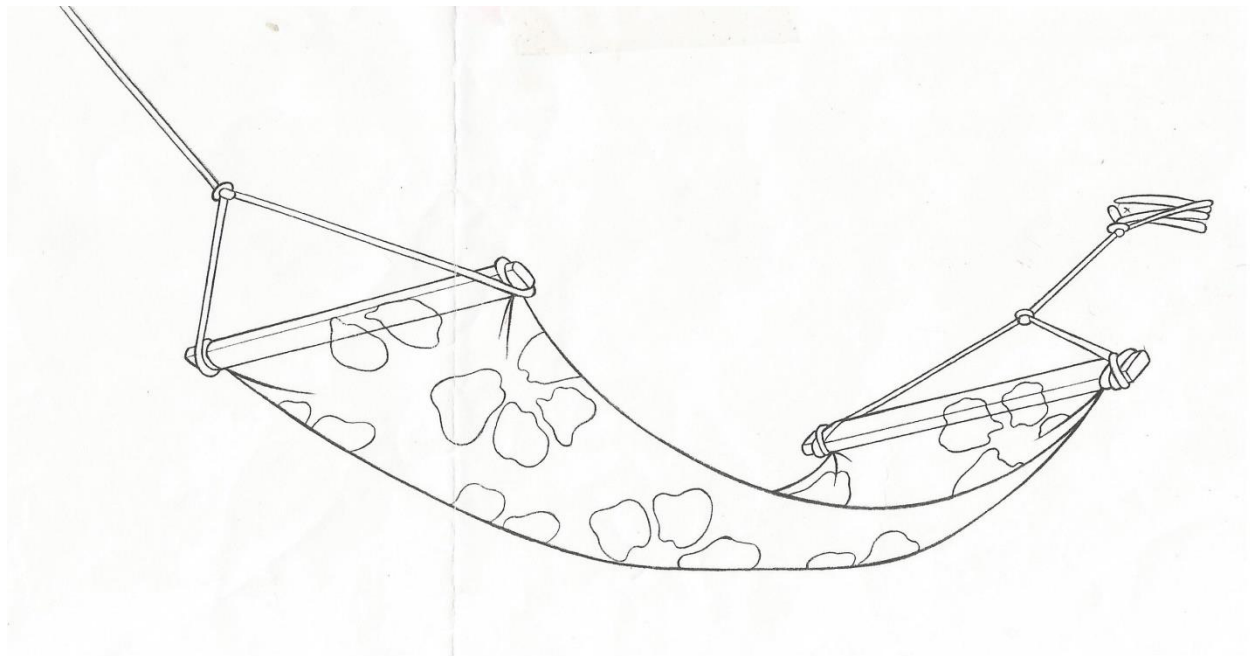


Image 4. Good line quality VS bad line quality.



Image 5. Drawing transfer sheet for *Big 5*, 2017



Image 6. Geometric objects created first for *Big 3*, 2016



Image 7. Close up hand. *Big I*, 2016



Image 8. Close up hand. *Big 2*, 2016



Image 9. Patrick Nagel, Duran Duran LP *Rio*,
Acrylic, 1981



Image 10. Alphonse Mucha, *La Topaze*,
Color lithography, 60 X 24 cm, 1900



Image 11. *Big I*, Colored pencil on paper, 78" X 42", 2016



Image 12. Francis Bacon, *Head I*, oil and tempera on wood, 100.3 X 75 cm, 1947

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